The Tall Dark Spire at the Edge of the Not-Sky

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Katioka was more than just Abraytha's home — Xiantio knew that. What she hadn't expected was to almost feel like a third wheel between the ship and pilot. Sometimes, in the morning, Xiantio would notice that Abraytha wasn't in bed anymore, and after wandering the vast halls they'd find him nustled up in the overhead of some arch, sound asleep. She'd leave him be and go back to bed, waiting to be woken for the breakfast he always made for her.

There had been about a week of that, now, since the pair of them had left the Interdimensional Scrapyard. In all those nine days, the House — Abraytha always insisted it was to be called that, not 'the Ship' — hadn't landed in any world; following the incident at the Scrapyard, both of them had concluded they needed some time to get used to each other before throwing themselves head-first into perilous adventure.

This morning, when Xiantio awoke, Abraytha was still in his bed. They could see him, just on the other side of the room. The thought felt childish, even rude, but he was so very cute when he was asleep — especially when cushioned by the soft blankets. His face had just one wrinkle, under the left eye, although he otherwise looked incredibly youthful; this one minute oddity sparked such curiosity in Xiantio — was Abraytha much older than he seemed, perhaps centuries? Had he suffered through some weird and awe-inspiring cataclysm which had aged only part of him, or did his species simply age in a manner very different from her own? She didn't wish to ask him any of these questions, because their existence made her so much more interested than she thought their answers possibly could.

Abraytha still looked sound asleep.

Xiantio's eyes sparkled as a thought occurred.

I could make breakfast for Abraytha.

She'd never had the chance before, what with him always waking up before her, but with the opportunity presenting itself so clearly before her… *yes.* It felt

right. It would be a fitting 'thank you' for all that Abraytha had done for them, and a nice gesture of equal care besides.

Thus it was that, very quietly and very carefully — like the cat they resembled — Xiantio stepped out of bed and across the floor, gently opening the bedroom door and closing it behind themself.

The kitchen was just down the hall.

* * *

After that incident at the Interdimensional Scrapyard, Abraytha had decided that he and Xiantio should cruise the Hollow and hang out in *Katioka* for a while, so as to get to know each other better, before attempting any adventuring again.

More precisely, he needed to get used to living around another person who cared for him, and whom he cared for in turn. It had been a long time since he'd run away from the Gieakraal, feeling his father didn't care that much for him, and only for his studies and lectures. He had sometimes thought — and after that learning experience with Xiantio, was starting to solidly believe — that his father *had* in fact cared a lot about him, but just like Abraytha himself, struggled to show it, falling to realise it when he was doing more harm than good.

Abraytha should probably go back, some day.

But not now. Right now, he was enjoying the experience of spending quality time with Xiantio and *Katioka*. During the days, he and the former would play boardgames or hide 'n' seek, discuss at length issues within their own societies and each other's, and just lie together on beanbags and sofas, basking in each other's company.

During the nights, he'd often leave his bed, half-asleep, and wander out into the familiar labyrinth that was his House and Home, falling asleep in a fireplace or other nook, warm in the embrace of his loving and loved *Katioka*.

Usually, before serving breakfast — cooked as much by *Katioka* as by Abraytha himself — he'd don one of his many colourful blazers, complete a bow. (Couldn't forget the bow, it really tied the outfit together.) He'd stare long and hard into the mirror, making sure there was nothing amiss with his reflection; only then would he waltz on down, back to the bedroom, to wake Xiantio up. And put on some trousers. Somehow, he always remembered that bit last.

Today, however, when Abraytha awoke, he found Xiantio's bed already empty. Mildly mystified and vaguely worried, he made his way through the corridor and towards the kitchen —

And there they were. Incredibly beautiful; handsome, even. Ears pricked up, as if listening out for the slightest sound, and their jaw was… Before Abraytha could finish that thought, Xiantio saw him and turned around to beckon him to sit at the table.

"Dinner is — no, shoot, *breakfast,* I meant breakfast. *Breakfast* is *served*!"

For the briefest moment, Abraytha was annoyed, because this had been *his* thing, making breakfast. But then he relaxed, and realised that Xi clearly meant this to be nice, and then he realised that it *was* nice, and he sat down, eager. Smiling.

Xiantio brought over the dishes and sat down near him. It was a Full English Breakfast. Of course, the sausages were slightly burnt; the egg was poached, not boiled or fried; and there was a distinct lack of black pudding. But Abraytha somehow found that none of this bothered him at all, and that, in fact, he was enjoying this breakfast much more than any he'd made in the previous days.

* * *

Xiantio could feel themself glowing with pride as Abraytha ate the breakfast they'd prepared with obvious enjoyment.

This seemed like as good an opportunity as ever.

"I was thinking, Abraytha," they began — "do you think we could land down somewhere today? Adventure *is* what I signed up for, as much as I've enjoyed this domestic life."

Domestic. They hadn't quite meant to use that word, but oh well.

"Mh? Sure!" Abraytha replied with a benign smile after swallowing a mouthful of egg. He seemed outright *pleased* with the suggestion — perhaps he'd been waiting for her to bring it up, to ensure that he wasn't controlling? "Anywhere in particular?"

"Er…" Xiantio froze up; they hadn't thought that far. "Uhm — well —"

"No, no, that's alright, I'll think of something," the other laughed. "I *am* the one who's meant to be showing you around. How about the Deus Initiative?"

Xiantio was about to reply with some good-natured crack to point out that they were vanishingly unlikely to have any context for whatever exotic locations Abraytha might name — then they paused, mouth agape, as they realised the name actually did ring a bell. But what…?

"Oh! Oh!" they said, snapping their fingers as they found it. "That's the people behind that Multiverse Designation System, right? The one used by that woman, you know, the who landed here just over a week back — Julie whatever-it-was —"

"Myes, mthat's mhe one," Abraytha said through a mouthful of beans.

"…Are they nice?"

"Won't know 'till we get there, will we?" the Unbound Scavenger replied with a wink. "But surely they're interesting. What do you say?"

Xiantio smiled *in lieu* of a reply. Just like that, it was agreed — just like that. Just like that, they were off to their second official adventure, and the first completely mutual one. Xiantio couldn't have been happier.

* * *

After breakfast, the pair made their way down to the central navigational complex, where Abraytha spent quite a while fluttering to and fro between interfaces; this giddiness was scarcely odd, because there were rather more of them than the last time they'd been here. It seemed that in their absence, the room itself had expanded, swelling from the rough size of an ordinary drawing room to the floorspace of a grand ballroom.

Xiantio had asked why this had occurred, to which Abraytha had answered that *Katioka* had probably 'just felt like it', unless perhaps it was the 'effect of sitting in the Hollow for a while, not having one's interior dimensions all bundled up within the interstices of real-timespace'. Xiantio had decided not to inquire further.

The actual job of locating which universe to travel to hadn't been much of an issue, as it was simply designated "the First Universe" under the Deus Initiative M.D.S..

It was looking to be a very good landing, the outer tendrils of the House reaching around to grab onto the nearby constant-points in reality — until, quite unexpectedly, the process halted, the entire structure of *Katioka* jolting like a vehicle whose wheel had hit a snag.

"Ack! What's happening?!" Xiantio called out to Abraytha, hanging on to whatever was to hand; the giant dance floor of the navigation room deck was now askew, and it was all she could do not to slide down and smash into a control panel.

Abraytha, for his part, was clinging onto one particular computer bank, as much for purchase as information. He stared at the readouts, agape, wings spread out like a parachute to stabilise himself as *Katioka* began to shake again.

"A-a dimensional barrier appeared, just as we were about to land!" he explained. "It knocked *Katioka* off course — just hang on tight! We're being dragged down into a backwater universe close by our target — we should make landfall safely in just a few —"

Before Abraytha could finish, there was a powerful, *wham!*-y sort of sound and the floor remembered how to be horizontal with, perhaps, more abruptness than its bipedal occupants would have preferred.

Katioka grew very still.

They'd arrived.

"Xiantio? Are you alright?" asked Abraytha, who'd been bowled over and was lying on his back, wings spread out on either side of him like a sunbather's beach towel.

"Been better," replied Xiantio, whose thin body was crumpled up in a corner, having rolled there like a ball of yarn with the final tremors. "You know, I was rather hoping we wouldn't go plummeting into an unknown universe again *quite* so soon."

"Ach… so was I," the seasoned adventurer confessed, getting to his feet. "But these things have a way of surprising you. Come along, now! Adventure awaits!"

It shouldn't've been surprising to any decently competent Multiverse traveller that the base universe of an organisation established enough to have documented over 31,466,344,713,163,653 universes — if the ordering was linear — would have dimensional barriers all around it, but as should be quite clear by now, the Unbound Scavenger wasn't really what one would call a 'decently competent Multiverse traveller', although he was both decently competent *and* a Multiverse traveller.

Xiantio carefully unfolded their limbs, and followed Abraytha out of the control deck without further argument or recrimination. They didn't feel there would be much point.

* * *

Yahed ill-Andre walked back from the shops again. It was the main thing he did: walk to the shops, walk back from the shops. Sometimes he paid for stuff,

sometimes he took stuff, sometimes he even paid for the stuff he took. At the back of his mind, though, Yahed felt like he could remember some far-off time when he'd done more than this… perhaps walked down to the Church? It seemed like an inordinate effort, like far more complexity than he needed in his life, but there you had it. The memory existed, but he rarely dwelled on it.

On this day, whatever it happened to be called, Yahed was walking down one of the aisles, when the unthinkable occurred: something, abruptly, *changed*.

He noticed immediately that something was off, but couldn't figure *what* had changed, nor even that anything in particular had done so, for a good few minutes.

The bananas. There were seven now, not six.

But that was outrageous! There were *always* six. The workers restocked the bananas, all of which had been purchased the previous day, and they always restocked them to a count of six. Never any different — never. How *could* it be any different? It couldn't. Yahed felt a knot of *something* twist in his stomach, and he became slightly more aware of his surroundings, in a deeply unpleasant way. His jacket was prickly. Too prickly. But he didn't take it off, it didn't even *occur* to him to do that. That would be *absurd*, no, worse. It would be *unconventional*. Inordinate.

Yahed made his way back home, a little more disturbed.

But the next day, it happened again. Now there were five bananas.

Then nineteen. That time Yahed laughed. A sort of maniacal cackle, combined with a chuckle of joy. What had the world come to? If the workers could put a different number of bananas out, maybe he *could* go to that Church on the corner. Anarchy on the march.

As he crossed the road on the way home, a car whooshed past him. That was odd, too. The car shouldn't've been there for another good five seconds. He laughed again, a mental fog slowly clearing.

A week passed, and small things kept being different. *A week*. Yahed could count the days now; they didn't all blend into each other.

In the shop that day, Yahed picked up *three* bananas instead of his usual one. The cashier looked shocked, dismayed, disgusted even. Yahed smiled.

The next day he did it again, this time buying two. The cashier broke down in tears, but didn't say a word.

On the way home, Yahed smiled and waved at a passerby. They looked offended, and ran on by. And they did again the next day, but slightly less. On the third day, they nodded awkwardly.

It was time to visit that church.

He didn't turn left towards his house, no; instead he turned right. Never in however-many-years had he gone down this street, despite it being *just there*. He'd never *cared* to, never thought it was worth it just as nothing was.

As Yahed's feet felt the new ground under his feet, he noticed that the houses around him seemed… unfulfilled. If he'd spent any amount of time reading or thinking creatively, Yahed might have said it was like the houses weren't finished, or perhaps that it seemed as though they were a painted backdrop whose lines and fillings were beginning to wash out with the wear and tear of ages. As it was, Yahed just scrunched his face up and frowned.

The Church. Here it was. Up-close, Yahed realised he wasn't all that certain it *was* a church, but that's what he'd always thought of it as, since it arrived.

Arrived? Surely the Church had always been here, had it not? Everything had.

Before Yahed could process that thought any further, a door halfway up the hodge-podge exterior of the so-called Church opened up, a ladder fell, and two figures came out. At once, Yahed felt amazed and disgusted at the uniqueness of their appearances. One of them had wings and horns, for mercy's sake, not to mention the technicolour blazer-jacket-thing, which defied categorisation. The other had ears on top of their hair, not unlike that of a domestic cat. In defiance

of their almost inconceivable difference from one another, the pair were holding hands.

Okay, *that* — that was a step too far. Yahed backed off slowly. Too far, too far, inordinate, *there are limits* —

"Hey, you!" the winged one hailed him. "Hello there! What's your name?"

Yahed blanched, so aghast that he stopped walking. Talking? These people *talked* to each other? Would these obscenities know no end?

* * *

There was a man on the street outside *Katioka*. Of him, about all that could be said was that he… *was*. That he existed. And, of course, that he had run away before anything more than that could be established.

Xiantio didn't know what it was that had made him so unnerving in the brief glimpse she'd gotten of the stranger. In fact, he *hadn't* been unnerving, that wasn't the right word — not exactly. Not even 'off-putting' seemed to fit. In fact, he seemed more… putting than anything else. On-putting? Was that a word? It fit. He was uncomfortably on-putting. In the presence of a man like that, you didn't recoil — you just stared without sight, and began to forget how to even want to do anything else. When Xiantio had looked at him, she'd felt like she wanted nothing whatsoever; not satisfaction, not contentment, but the most oppressive apathy she had ever tasted. The call of the void personified. She didn't have a word for it — Xiantio was often one to think of a word on the spot, in situations like these, but just right now she didn't really care. *On-putting* was the best she was going to get, and even that coinage had been slipping away into an effortful past best left undisturbed, part and parcel of that whole, wearisome state of being called "awareness" —

— when the man had turned and run, and the colours of the world had come flooding back. Xiantio hadn't even realised they'd gone. Abraytha! Oh, lovely Abraytha, to think they'd stopped caring. They gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and playfully pushed him off the ladder's last few steps, hurrying him

on his way down. As Xiantio had expected, their friend turned his fall into a saunter, landing one-footed the floor with an almost feline grace; but then, as if to affirm that bats weren't cats despite the rhyme, fell over. Xiantio grinned, and made their own way down the ladder, their tinkling laughter echoed by Abraytha's own.

* * *

Yahed returned to the shop and took a single banana, making to carry it home. A tear trickled down his cheek. He couldn't remember why.

* * *

Looking to the sky, Xiantio saw that there wasn't one. It wasn't like the inky blackness as which one might crudely picture the absence of anything, or the edge of the universe. It just *wasn't*, as if perception itself wrapped itself shut all around the planet they were on. If they focused and forced their attention towards it, they could just about make out a kind of fog — yes, that was it. No colour, but the haziest, the almost *painful* sense of the kind of view one got when one looked into fog on a foggy day.

Xiantio snapped her attention away from the not-sky. It was starting to affect her narration.

* * *

At first, Abraytha was horrified.

He'd seen the like of that foggy not-sky just once before, on his first proper trip aboard *Katioka*, when he and his beloved vessel had ridden its rolling banks over the ancient walls which surrounded the core Universe. But even then, the greyness hadn't been *that* absolute. Abraytha supposed — and although he didn't know this, due to not having read the whole book, *A Cosmography of the Bellbreaker's Cradle and Related Worlds Thereof* concurred — that the whole 'Wall' thing at the Cradle's edge was what made it more stable than… what would appear to be a 'normal' edge. He shivered, the terror of an unguarded universe just now occurring to him.

Abraytha started walking off before he could continue down this route of existential dread; instead he smiled, and looked around for Xiantio.

* * *

Xiantio wasn't really sure why she'd run off, except that she wanted to explore this world and running off — making Abraytha follow her — was the best way to do that. Nevertheless, she stopped at the corner and waited, mainly because she couldn't be bothered to go any further. There didn't seem to be any point.

"What did you do *that* for?" Abraytha asked.

"Dunno," Xiantio replied, noncommittal.

Abraytha sighed. His companion had never been more like the cats whose anatomy her ears and posture evoked. Somehow, he found that charming.

"Look, we need to fix *Katioka*," he told her. "I was right, this *isn't* the Deus Initiative's home universe."

"Is *Katioka* actually broken?"

"Well, not broken as such," the pilot dithered. "Less damaged than it was when it landed on your world, to be sure. Still, our dear old vessel would probably at least appreciate a gift to coax it back into health."

"M'kay."

After that, they just stood in slightly uncomfortable silence for a while, staring at nothing in particular — after a while, they began quite literally twiddling their thumbs. Every facet of this place seemed to invite inaction.

But then Yahed walked past, carrying a solitary banana, and screamed.

The travellers came back to themselves — why had they been mellowing in inaction?

Abraytha composed himself, and spoke to the lad. "Hello lad, what's your name? What is this place?"

The lad looked aghast, but this time didn't run away.

"I… My name is Yahed. This is here… I don't understand". Yahed looked very confused.

"Okay, let's try something else. Who runs this place? City Council?"

Yahed thought for a good while, and then his face lit up. "The Council. Frogs? No, the Day? Us?"

Abraytha looked grave. "Thank you, Yahed." He walked away, and Xiantio followed.

"So what was that about?" they asked.

"*Day-Us*. Deus! The Deus Initiative! We might have bounced off their homeworld, but they must still be behind this, somehow… whatever 'this' is.."

Xiantio didn't answer.

"Xiantio?" asked Abraytha.

"What? Oh, why does it matter? Can't we just get on with life, go to the shop and stop worrying about all of this anyway? Nothing we could do could make a difference, it just isn't possible, and that's okay."

Abraytha was appalled. "No it's not! What's up with you, Xiantio? What's with all this defeatism? Where's that determined enby I met in the snowy forests around the Cathedral of Winter, ey?"

Xiantio sighed. "I dunno. Guess I just grew up, realised that youthful idealism was just that… Youthful idealism."

"Grew *up*!?" Abraytha was aghast, wings unfurling in shock as he whirled round to fully face Xiantio. "What in mercy's name — Xiantio, it's barely been ten *days* since the Cathedral! What do you *mean*, you're all grown up now!?"

"Are you saying I'm immature?" Xiantio snapped in reply, and put one more step between them. A glimmer of emotion had returned to their face, but not at all the ones Abraytha had been looking for. "After the Scrapyard, I thought — I thought you'd learnt to *respect* me!"

They were shouting now; Abraytha tried to lift a placating hand, but that only caused Xianto to recoil again, as if they'd interpreted the benign gesture as a physical threat.

"But I see that's not the case!" they finished. "Good-*bye*!".

Abraytha stood there, dumbfounded, as his friend ran off in all-too-familiar huff. This resentment, this argument wasn't new. But they'd grown past it — hadn't they? Yet here they were, dragged back into it. As though their relationship had become…

…stagnant.

* * *

Three streets away, Xiantio fell to the ground in tears, head pounding with a swirl of painful, confused thoughts.

Why would Abraytha do that, why would —

But hold on, what *had* he done? Why…

Why had she acted like that?

Lying on the ground, the not-sky was all-encompassing.

Except it wasn't. There was something else there, off to the left — some elongated splodge or smear.. A line…? A tower, perhaps? Xiantio sat up, looking around for it. After a lot of lying down and sitting up again, she finally found it. A tall dark spire at the edge of the not-sky. Perhaps the tallest belltower of some cathedral?

Figuring that there wasn't much else to do, Xiantio began walking towards the spire. Strangely enough, the whole layout of the city seemed to be structured

as if to lead toward it, although it looks less like architects had built *toward* it, and more like they hadn't bothered to change the path as the city grew around it. A literal path of stagnation; Xiantio chuckled as the thought clicked into place.

It seemed to take forever to get to the end of that well-worn path, and multiple times Xiantio was about to throw in the towel — but then she forced herself onwards, acutely aware that giving up was exactly what 'they' *wanted* her to do. 'They' being the builders of this dispiriting place, which was to say, presumably, the Deus Initiative.

And for all that, for all that oppressive sense of the journey taking forever, Xiantio stopped to realise that they had found themself right in front of the door. At no point did they remember teleporting outright, and the trek, beyond the crushing aura of the place it cut through, hadn't felt overtly supernatural. Yet here they were. Quite possibly, this was just what walking somewhere a little ways off felt like. Maybe. Who knew? Who *cared*?

* * *

Well, Abraytha cared, for one. At least a little; perhaps even a fair bit. He had seen the spire off in the distance; he knew that if Xiantio hadn't succumbed to this forsaken place and decayed into ashen apathy — and surely they had to believe that, didn't they — then they'd be heading toward that too.

Yet he didn't run.

It wasn't *that* important, after all. Just *quite* important, and 'quite' could wait, especially in these shoes.

* * *

The doors of the Cathedral opened, and Xiantio fell in. Suddenly her head cleared, and she cared. Where was Abraytha? Where was *she*?

For now, she was some sort of entrance hall, grandiose and high-vaulted. At the opposite end of that tall and imposing room stood a tall and imposing figure; the lighting meant Xiantio couldn't make out their features, but there was

definitely a cloak, its opulent folds flapping in the breeze. Although, come to think of it, there wasn't a breeze.

The door slammed.

"What is your name?" the figure asked.

"Xi…Xiantio" came her meek reply.

"Well then, *Xiantio* — tell us. How did you come upon this realm?"

"I… our ship. House! Our House. Me and…" Xiantio replied shyly, and heard herself trailing off, her eyes still trying to make out the oddly alluring sight of her interrogator. "Sorry, I can't seem to… You're just so… beautiful — so *sophisticated*."

The figure scoffed and glided away.

And Xiantio was left on the floor, wondering about this person. Even though they'd barely seen them, they'd looked *so interesting*. It was unfathomable. *Entrancing*.

* * *

On his way to the Cathedral, Abraytha walked past where he *thought* he'd parked *Katioka*, and found no space-time vessel in sight.

A lot of places probably look similar around here, he thought.

There was no time to investigate further; Xiantio might be in trouble, he dimly told himself through the unpleasant fuzz. Besides, people seemed to be slowly filing out of their houses and making their shuffling way towards the Cathedral. This was by no means disconcerting. Upon having this sarcastic thought, Abraytha silently thanked his gods for the fact that he still had enough cohesion and care to *be* sarcastic, and to notice that it *was* in fact disconcerting to see everyone in the city, who had previously been so fundamentally listless, converging on any one trajectory.

* * *

Xiantio dragged themself across the floor, exercising all their available will, until at long last they made it to the preaching lectern. There they were, sitting on the *cathedra*, the questioning one. So beautiful, and so terrible.

Xiantio had figured it out: this creature (whatever in Summer they were) had sapped all of the interestingness out of this city, and that's why its physique was so entrancing by comparison. Had that been the point, all along? Vanity? They just wanted to… No! Concentrate! Maybe they *were* a delegate of the Deus Initiative, maybe they weren't. It hardly seemed important at the moment; the prime directive, if this was indeed the culprit, was to defeat this guy, help save the people, and get back to *Katioka*, preferably in that order.

To help themself concentrate, Xiantio forced themself to look away from the pursuing figure and take in more details of the Cathedral. There were windows all around it, and for all they knew that what lay outside of the Cathedral was a banal town, she glimpsed a very different landscape behind the tinted glass. Blue skies, dotted with airships. A ship drifted past, close enough to see more than its outline; it looked like some kind of great bronze fractal, all of clockwork — almost flower-like, with a burning heart at the centre and a small flotilla of lesser crafts in tow like a school of fish trialling after a great basking whale.

The figure was getting closer to Xiantio, and she could see its skin. It glistened in a thousand different colours, but so very dimly, so that you had to be near to see its beauty. The shifting colours called to you, lured you in. The skin also looked like it was wefting through different phases of reality, and the hairs on it had hairs of their own, and it looked like, perhaps, skin.

Ooh, it had fangs. And the fangs had fangs, repeating in a fractal pattern of menacing mesmerism.

Oh dear.

* * *

After what felt like an eternity and yet no time at all, Abraytha reached the Cathedral doors. Among the mess of a crowd, Yahed could just about be seen,

looking slightly more alert than the rest of the townspeople, but still with a noticeably glassy look to his eyes.

The doors parted to let in the crowd, and they all knelt at the pews, the townspeople. Abraytha kept expecting it to look like they were being controlled — either telepathically or telekinetically — but no, all the people seemed to be moving of their own, incredibly bored will.

There was a book at each pew, which the townspeople did not read from. At first the hall seemed to stretch on forever, but an effort of focus revealed that the whole Cathedral was just covered in a truly ridiculous amount of mist, as if whatever entity controlled the church wished its attendees to be mystified at all times, overwhelmed with otherworldly reverence. But the preaching lectern was still visible, its iconic shape looming through the haze like a lighthouse in a storm. At a guess, that was precisely the effect which whatever luminary intended to speak at that pulpit hoped to evoke.

Through the windows which adorned both walls, Abraytha could see what looked like some kind of floating clockwork fractal; a little further off, they spotted a vessel resembling an Old Earth sailing ship, and what looked like the corpse of a Grychron, the time-faring species of his homeworld. That last one made him shed a tear, as he remembered his parent's Grychon; he'd always loved the old thing so. Why was the body of its kin left out beyond those windows? What beautiful, heartless land was he beholding?

It felt disrespectful walking down the carpet, and his every fibre felt compelled to kneel in worship. No, not worship, not quite. That would have been easy to resist; down to their bones, however thin their willpower might run, Abraytha *knew* they would kneel for no god nor hero. None were worthy of it.

The command pressing at the edges of his mind was more acute, yet less demanding. The Cathedral wanted him to *listen* to the sermon.

Well, after all, why not? Why *shouldn't* he stay and hear it? Listening couldn't do any harm, could it…

* * *

Xiantio was dressed in a very formal suit; they didn't know the proper terms, but a long piece of fabric attached to her waist trailed after them on the ground. She felt out of sorts — as well she might, parted down the middle. Her left half was grey and decaying, whilst her right was more vibrant than she had been when she'd landed here.

Their husband ran his long, bony fingers across their arm, and beckoned for them to follow him.

Husband? Wha —

They followed him into what must have been the garden, although it was almost unrecognisable as one. There were vines passing down from the glass roof, and the whole place was…

Oh God, it looked like the not-sky — oh God, was the Universe collapsing oh God oh God —

He gestured for them to sit, and they did. Of course they would, he was their husband, was he not?

Wasn't he?

Xiantio couldn't remember marrying a freakishly tall, yet devilishly beautiful man. That seemed like the kind of thing they would remember.

What was the last thing she —

Oh.

Oh.

She had been staring into those eyes, those oh-so-gorgeous eyes, and into his mouth with the fractal fangs. And then she'd been here.

But why…

His skin was so soft, almost malleable. Their arm passed through the outermost layer of it, but that seemed normal.

The view was immaculate, a hundred worlds gliding past. This wasn't the not-sky, no, quite the opposite. This was the *all-sky*. Xiantio mused that perhaps the beautiful man had stolen the skies of a great many worlds, and filled this garden with them like exotic flowers.

But it wasn't beautiful, not truly, no more than the collector of skies himself. It was *sickening*, the way he treated beauty and interestingness, as if it were a commodity which could be acquired — or as the case may be, stolen.

What was worse, though, was that he seemed to be *right*.

A hundred worlds gliding past…

Xiantio's mind cleared once more, and they had an idea.

* * *

Abraytha was still kneeling at his pew. The priest, or whoever, *whatever* stood at the pulpit… spoke of many things. It seemed to have a lot to say.

One of the many things it said was that his House had been taken away, but he thought that was okay. Why would he need a house, anyway? The Cathedral and the town was all he needed. Really, he could sit at this pew forever. Why not? The priest had a lot to say. At first Abraytha had been curious; now they were simply at rest, content — if content was the right word — to keep listening to the portentous patter. He had some good points too, that priest. The Universe truly *was* without cause or consequence, and what difference *did* it make if we all submitted to the Will? Wouldn't it be so much *simpler*?

Except…

Except…

It took considerable time and effort for Abraytha to place the sense in which that train of thought chafed, but the rolling waves of the priest's endless, circular

sermon could not wash away that twinge of discomfort, and at last, without outside warning, Abraytha sat up with a start.

He'd never <u>wanted</u> things to be simple.

Before the lethargy could set in again, he stood up from his pew, sparing a moment to appreciate the rest his bout of boredom had given him. Then he hopped off, heading across the hall to…

What was he doing again? Wouldn't it be much easier, much less effort, to just lie down and rest? Not forever, but just for a bit…

That should've been in italics, thought Abraytha, the strangeness of the thought passing them by entirely, *considering it was the direct thoughts of this very Cathedral. Or its Will.*

But Abraytha was wrong, he really couldn't be bothered.

Yes I can. I will walk over to Yahed. I am doing it now. I… Abraytha…

<u>…Abraytha will lie down and touch his skin into the dirt of the body, and he shall be with us and in communion…</u>

* * *

Xiantio guided her husband toward the balcony which opened onto the all-sky.

They embraced.

I love you, he said, in a voice that needed no words. *I hope to spend the rest of my days with you.*

Weirdly, Xiantio felt like he was genuine. Maybe for him years *had* passed, or maybe spending so long in a world full of boring people meant that one would latch onto the first person with the merest semblance of interestingness.

Either way, it mattered not. Xiantio felt no hesitation, no struggle to do what she was going to do — what she *had* to do — to this vampire of the ideal.

She stepped off the balcony, and into the all-sky, and she took him with her. They fell through the hundreds of worlds, and she saw a thousand faces. And as they passed one of them, she saw what looked like a pirate ship —

— and it was travelling towards them —

* * *

Captain Zequalm sat in his cabin, admiring the maps so carefully crafted by the Cartographer. He and his crew — Dead Weathermen all, to the last man — had been scouring the intervoids without much purpose for quite a while now; precisely how long being, of course, impossible to determine without the remits of causality.

The First Mate came rushing down from the helm, where she'd been keeping an eye on the dimensional currents around.

"Sir! Cap'tn!"

Zequalm turned around. "What is it?"

"There's…" The First Mate paused for breath. "In a nearby dimension — it's hardly a universe really, more like a bubble — there's a trace of a Shambler from the Stars. One from our *original universe*. They're not meant to be out here, are they? I thought our people had killed them all at the Founding, with stakes and intricate patterns and whatnot?"

Zequalm tapped his lower lip, adopting the kind of sage look which the chiselled features of his current vessel facilitated.

"Killed them all? Oh, I think not," he mused. "Purged them from normal-space, yes… but as the legends say, the Shamblers hid behind the stars. And behind some stars lie other universes. Especially back then."

"Oh. But…" The First Mate blinked, her rush of patriotic fervour stoppered halfway by the Captain's tranquil reply. "But shouldn't we?"

"Deal with this one? Oh yes, yes, certainly," Zequalm replied with cheerful insouciance; he spun on the wheels of his chair and hopped to his feet like a child, belying the age of his chosen frame. "We wouldn't want it running around infecting the Multiverse with its taint, now would we? But do cheer up, old thing, it's not so grave as all that. Just a bit of pest control. Might be a spot of fun, eh?"

The First Mate nodded, their certainty restored — and hurried back to find the Coxswain, burning to tell them to change course towards the Shambler.

* * *

Suddenly, Yahed's mind cleared, as if a heavy fog had just been removed, or perhaps as if a flea had just stopped sucking his blood.

There was no time to ruminate, though. Even as he began to notice all the pretty little details of the Cathedral, he saw that it was collapsing from the back, falling away into the most beautiful and most interesting opposite-of-a-void he had ever seen, and for a few moments Yahed was utterly transfixed. But for the first time in his life, he was also *afraid*. Afraid of dying, afraid of not making his life worth it, and afraid of giving his selfhood up to something greater, because he believed himself to be worthy of his own actualisation.

This was all a lot to process within a few seconds, but the end result was that Yahed shouted "Run!" — the sharpest, loudest word he'd ever uttered — to his fellows, rushing them out of the Cathedral. He stayed, through his fear and his hope for the future, until everyone but that man with the horns and wings, whom he'd first seen climbing out of the church-like structure a few hours ago, had left the church.

"Run!" he implored to the horned man a second time.

"No! My…friend is back there!" the stranger replied, fighting against the wind to try and walk into the shimmering whorl.

A storm had begun to rage through the Cathedral, and the arches were falling.

"I-I — then let's go find them!" Yahed bellowed over the sound of the storm, surprised at his own courage.

"I! Not you!"

Yahed was scared, but he was determined. "Do you *want* to stand here arguing, or shall we search?"

"Alright!" Abraytha shouted, reaching the end of his reluctance, and the odd duo clasped hands, lending weight to one another as they braved the rushing winds.

As they turned down a side-corridor, the structure of the hall collapsed as a great looming ship crashed into it.

It looked like the very archetype of a pirate ship, straight out of human imagination — yet it flew on nothing at all. Seeing no alternative, Yahed and Abraytha jumped onto it.

"Halphregaz?" one of the sailors called out.

He was dressed like a steamship aviator and his beard was dyed two different colours; blue on the left side and pink on the right.

"What?" asked Abraytha and Yahed in unison.

"The Halphregaz! The Universe-Killers, the Shamblers from the Stars. They — oh, Voids forgive me," he paused, and drew himself up with a bit more dignity and a little less frantic urgency. "Let me explain. We," he recited, "are of the Dead Weathermen. As Archons born, it is our sacred blood-duty to seek out the fiends and destroy them. We were sailing along when we perceived that one of the great foes was on the prowl hereabouts. Now we mean to capture it, spear it through and free this world from its curse. So then — have you *seen* the Hungry Horror? Quickly now!"

"I… a Hunger? Parasitism? Yes, that must be it!" Abraytha realised, snapping his fingers. "Whatever your Shuffler —"

"*Shambler*."

"— is up to must be related to this, this Cathedral down there — it seemed to be draining the motivation of these people."

"*Did* it, now?" said the pirate with the double-coloured beard; if he didn't introduce himself, and sharpish, Abraytha had half a mind to begin thinking of him as plainly Two-Beard. Certainly naming him for that trait seemed more tactful than harping on about that rather nifty-looking prosthetic arm of his. "Did it indeed… Interesting method; yes, I suppose that makes sense. Insofar as the physical universe is but an emergence of the Rules, arising themselves from the panpsyche of the Universe itself… Yes. *Horrific*, of course, but *interesting*."

"Well, the issue is rather that it's *boring,*" commented Yahed. "From inside, anyway."

"He's got that right," Abraytha confirmed.

"Quite so. Well, off we go!" shouted Two-Beard.

Finally catching his wits, Abraytha turned to his rescuers.

"Hang on," he said — "I have a friend, Xiantio. They're —"

"…safe aboard our ship by now," Two-Beard interrupted with a seaman's proud, barking laugh. "They're the one who signalled us to come get you." He looked around the mess. "Anyone else worth rescuing?"

"Actually, yes," Yahed interjected. "There's a whole town out there, a city perhaps, I'm not sure how big it is. We need your help."

"Right! Back into the decaying universe it is!" said Two-Beard; and this, he said in the distinctive tone of someone whose boots had been positively itching for renewed contact with the breach, yet who feels that expressing out-and-out enthusiasm for the once-more-unto might come across as insufficiently sympathetic with the plight of the slaughtered.

Now more than ever it became obvious to Abraytha that Two-Bead and his crewmates were not pirates at all, but something much more romantic and unpredictable: beings who had dedicated their whole lives — and quite long lives at that —, and their not-inconsiderable talent, to the task of *playing* pirates.

Not, of course, that Abraytha was in any position to judge.

"Activating *val-bauble*," Two-Bearded added, a child with a toy gizmo as he tapped a small device attached to his belt.

At once, a force field materialised around him, ready to hold off the Nothing of the Void, and before he knew it, Yahed found himself wrapped around Two-Beard like a baby koala to share that same protective bubble. Abraytha watched curiously as the old man stepped up onto the wooden railing of the ship, sure-footed, and counted — judging his angle. He was going to jump across the frothing Nothing and back into the town, which Yahed could now glimpse, gliding under the shadow of the ship — and shrinking, fast.

No, *falling*; that's what it looked like.

His town was falling. The shop he'd brought bananas from every day was disappearing under his very eyes. Was the ship simply rising? No, surely not — not that fast, not when its crew had been apprised of the need to get back down and rescue the stragglers. His home, which, for so many years, had been kept in suspension above nothing at all by the power of the beauty-hoarder, was genuinely dropping into the abyss now that its parasitic patron had vacated it.

Yahed's eyes were wide and panicked. The void was *right there*, with nothing physical to protect him from it, just a little utility bubble, which looked as fragile as soap… He could see the edges of it quivering and rippling like gelatin. He was about to voice his discomfort and ask Two-Beard to, perhaps, set him down before doing anything rash, but —

"*Hup*!"

They launched themselves out of the window.

Just as they did so, a bit of debris from the fractured Cathedral hit the bubble —

— knocking them sideways into the void —

— and sent them careening off-target, spinning off in zero-gravity, *away* from the town!

"*Deus*, we're dead!" Yahed exclaimed.

Then he *screamed,* as the only two islets of solid ground in sight, the floating ship and the falling town, spun around in his field of vision. Even Two-Beard's face had gone pale.

"C-calm down!" the man stuttered. "Force equals mass times acceleration. We can change our course by, uh…"

He extended his pistol and turned it at an angle so the kickback would slow their rotation. Two-Beard, of course had forgotten — and Yahed had never known — that this technique shouldn't rightfully work outside of the remits of any laws of physics; but it was well that he had. In lawless patches of creation such as these, rules emerged from the mental dimension; the raw substance of reality, submissive and confused, was positively eager for a big strong god to tell it what to do.

And so the technique worked.

"Aarugh!"

Yahed shouted the moment he saw the Weatherman squeeze the trigger, the energy blast burning through the bubble which protected them from the void; as Two-Beard had known would happen, the Nothing of the Void rushed in, viscous globs of non-being that ate away at everything they touched — which in this case, given the angle of the perforation, meant the pistol, part of Two-Beard's arm, and a patch of skin on Yahed's shoulder.

"Unmerciful zombie crucking Mithras!" Two-Beard bellowed — but the gambit had paid off; they were *moving*. Working swiftly, the archonic buccaneer

pulled off his own cybernetic arm and used it as a dam against the onslaught of void-blobs; the malicious little un-things ate neat holes through the casing, but the gleaming bone shoved them back until the bubble re-formed.

"Okay…" began Two-Beard. He licked his lips nervously and then started again as the ship whirled overhead. "Okay, that was *too* energetic, but we can still do it, just need t'go slower."

There was a faint *sputter* inside their bubble and the acrid smell of frying electronics as the *val-bauble* on the Weatherman's hip gave out.

Two-Beard grabbed for it frantically as the bubble began to wobble and destabilise — but it was no good. The projectile which had knocked them loose had struck directly on the *val-bauble* on his hip.

The bubble around them stopped shrinking. Slowly, it began to grow. Yahed could feel it, the energy the Dead Weatherman was channelling into his detached arm — burning his very life-force for a few minutes more of safety.

Giving me enough room to swing my (other) arm.

When next they spun away from the ship above, Yahed flung the empty scabbard out of the bubble faster than the eye could see. It vanished into the void — but the force of it changed the course. They were drifting upwards now. He spidered around the pirate and unhooked the dead *val-bauble* from his belt, and took the remains of the gun. Waiting for their spin to match up, he flung these too — until they no longer floated away from the Weathermen's ship, but towards it.

"Going to bounce off…!" the man muttered as he breathed.

"Let me worry about —" Yahed braced himself.

The bubble hit the underside of the ship's hull, and they did, indeed, bounce off, now heading solidly towards the town.

They made contact.

Two-Beard's gaze swept across the burning haze overhead — the churning amalgam of the not-sky and the all-sky — and he knew the Dead Weathermen would never be able to return, to find him.

Now that the Weathermen's ship had drifted further away, Two-Beard could see the truth: it hadn't been the collapse of the Cathedral, or even the removal of that being holding onto Xiantio, that had kick-started the accelerating decay of Yahed's town, although that definitely hadn't helped — no — it had been the arrival of their ship. There had been a delicate equilibrium to this world of stolen beauty and empty lives; the Vampire had made it for such a singular purpose, and drained it so *thin* outwith the heart wherein he dwelled, that it was a celestial house of cards, ready to fall apart at the slightest upset. *Katioka*'s landing had been about the most that it could bear; the arrival, however peaceful, of a second higher-dimensional vessel had finished it off before the Weathermen's commandoes had even rappelled down to abduct the master of the land.

There was hardly any of this town left, now — Two-Beard estimated it was about five miles in diameter — but it wasn't collapsing or decaying any longer. With him and Yahed, the people could rebuild, and learn to appreciate the beauty of themselves and each other… They could discover what they might find interest in. To care, to think, and to live. He breathed out… Perhaps that wasn't so bad. Perhaps he'd had enough of playtime, and maps, and cushy cabins, and endless skies.

Perhaps…

This was a good end.

* * *

"Xiantio? *Xiantio!* Xiantio, are you there?!"

Abraytha rushed across the deck of Captain Zequalm's ship, shouting for his friend. He was fairly sure he was going in circles, but he couldn't simply give up — at last, a female-presenting Dead Weatherman, her rugged charms too real-looking to convince, shouted after him, and stopped him in his tracks.

"They're not *that* way, mate!" she explained. "Look, erm — little detail the other fella might've forgot to mention… When we picked'em up, we found'em embracing — well, *someone*, out there in the Void. Well, the part they were in wasn't really a void, in fact ye might say it was damn near the opposite, but — ach, follow me."

Abraytha did so, and he noticed that this Dead Weatherman, as well as all the rest he passed, also had double-coloured hair, retrospectively making his naming of 'Two-Beard' quite undistinctive. He wondered what the sailor's real name had been.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Vekwalm, of the Captaincy of Zequalm. You?"

"Abraytha. Abraytha Janus Colefia, son of Yophese Colefia."

There were mutual nods, and no further questions; neither adventurer felt the need to inquire as to whether this was because each was already familiar with the significance of the other's name and title, or because of the opposite. Regardless, with those brief introductions, they had reached an unspoken understanding, and they walked together down to the cell in which the Dead Weathermen had been holding Xiantio and… the other. The entity Xiantio they had been embracing.

There was a mesmerising beauty to the ancient creature. Abraytha had met many a being whose essence extended into more dimensions than Earthlings could fathom — starting with Captain Zequalm's crew — but none quite like this, whose shifting graces were constantly rippling in and out of those higher spheres, giving their beauty the eternal, self-renewing quality of a waterfall in sunlight, even when they weren't moving a muscle.

It was odd to think that, if it really was some offshoot of the daimonic rulers of the Second Universe, this mesmerising vision was some kind of far-flung relative to him and his mother. Although, of course, he couldn't fully dismiss the awkward possibility that the Weathermen's instruments had picked up his *own*

biodata, making the entity's nature a mystery all over again. Regardless, it was odder yet to think that a creature this stunning had hidden itself beyond all worlds and lived in seclusion, leeching off the lives of others until even they, his pets and livestock, had lost the capacity to appreciate their master's magnificence.

Yet for all that, the tall aesthete's beauty couldn't hold a candle to that of Xiantio. That was what *he* had, by all appearances, never grasped, for all the uniqueness and the interest he'd devoured. Beauty and interest were fundamentally subjective — they were in the eye of the beholder, sustained only at the whim of their judge.

Abraytha turned away from the sedated collector in all his hollow grace, with definite finality, and focused his gaze on Xiantio —

— and from that moment on, he saw no other beauty in the room.

* * *

He was so soft.

He was so soft, and so beautiful, and the stories he whispered to her were unlike anything she had ever heard before. Some of them were horrific, some lovely, but all ultimately captivating. She didn't think anything could ever make her want to leave her husband's side, and

— and then they saw Abraytha —

— and something broke.

It was a subtle change in the pattern of their dreamlike thoughts, and yet it made all the difference. *Abraytha* was so soft, and so wonderful, and such a bringer of marvels. *Abraytha* was theirs, and they were Abraytha's. It didn't matter how interesting the person in their arms could prove himself to be — his tale simply wasn't the story Xiantio wanted to live in and through and with.

So she stepped away from him, and towards Abraytha.

The cell bars, which they hadn't even noticed until now, were quickly let down and back up again by the pirate on duty. She hadn't noticed the pirates until now, but now she could appreciate the beauty of the whole world, not just that which belonged to and flowed from Him.

Only now did it occur to Xiantio that she hadn't ever thought of a name for the parasite which she had, in her daze, thought of as a husband — not even a title or descriptor worthy of a capital letter. He'd been tall, and male, and robed, and that was all she could say for sure. His own decision, no doubt; he had thought it would add to his aura, his mystique.

His loss. It would just make it that much easier to forget him.

* * *

Xianto jumped out towards Abraytha — the Dead Weatherman opened the bars and closed them again — and he held open his arms for them; they embraced, and Abraytha knew the embrace was warmer and more genuine than anything the vestige could have offered.

As Abraytha helped Xiantio to stay standing up, the Dead Weatherman received a notification from some kind of device strapped to their holster. They checked it, business-like — but when they looked up, their face was grave.

"I… Zequalm… I have news," they said. "D-did ye meet him, Master Colefia, before the end? Ye didn't, didn't ye?"

"Meet who?"

"*Zequalm*," they repeated. "*Captain* Zequalm. The brightest of us all — the man who went off with that boy, back to the town?"

"That was your *Captain*?!" Abraytha repeated, stunned — and more than a little grateful that they hadn't caught him calling Zequalm 'Two-Beard' out loud.

"Aye, sir. And… he's. gone. None of the other Dead Weathermen can reach him. He's marooned in that decaying town. Perhaps dead. Surely good as. If there's any ground left for him to stand on, to go back for him in a ship like

ours would shatter it underfoot afore we landed… He'll never sail again," the female-presenting Weatherman concluded, a haunted look in her eyes.

The cell was still occupied, and the Dead Weathermen didn't really know what to do with whatever it was which was housed within. For now, they just left it, busying themselves with the preparation for the late Captain's funeral.

There was so much to do, and none of them wanted to do it. Abraytha and Xiantio helped out where they could, clearing the grand hall, preparing food, and consoling members of the crew.

A casket was prepared, engraved in large print with strange, almost Hellenic symbols — and beyond them, with far more tokens and messages than Abraytha and Xiantio could hope to comprehend. Its purpose, of course, was not to actually hold the late Captain's body, which was surely lost, but a coffin would still be needed to act as a symbolic anchor for the ceremony. Once procured, the solemn container was laden with flowers; one for each and every Weatherman in the vessel, and two more for the strangers. The eldest member of the voyage, who still faintly recalled this Captaincy's most recent encounter with a strain of the Shambling Infestation — the Vampires from Venus — acted as the undertaker and celebrant.

"Captain Zequalm, I'm sure all of us under his Captaincy would agree, was a fundamentally beautiful man. Not just physically — although I am given to understand many found him so — but emotionally, and socially. He understood the responsibilities and duty of the Captain, and he respected all of his shipmates. To this end, and to all others, we, the Dead Weathermen, wish Captain Zequalm to have peace hereafter, and to rejoice in the embrace of whatever lies beyond."

To end the ceremony, Xiantio, the undertaker, and one other Dead Weatherman carried the casket from its catafalque and out to a large window in the grand hall. Then, very slowly and very respectfully, the coffin was let loose into the Void, to drift between realities and dissipate.

* * *

After the ceremony, Abraytha remembered.

He didn't know how he'd forgotten — he was disgusted with himself.

Katioka.

They'd left *Katioka* behind in the decaying village. Who knew where it was now, if it was even still alive, still in existence? The pain of vehicular, *familial*, separation, was… not unbearable. In fact, it was painfully bearable. There was just a tight knot in the pit of the Unbound Scavenger's stomach, a constant reminder that what made him so Unbound no longer was; what did that make him? What *was* he, now?

He pushed the feeling away, deep down. Even without a vessel of his own in which to travel it, he could always count on the Multiverse to be full of distractions. First order of business: figuring out what to do with the ticking time-bomb burdening the Dead Weathermen's ship — that silent, iridescent monster who had nearly hurt Xiantio so unconscionably, had it not been for his companion's exceptional will and quick wits.

Some of the Weathermen had suggested using a stake to kill it, a line of thinking which Abraytha had done his best to nip in the bud — armed with appeals to decency and the sacredness of life, plus the observation that for all his fiendish predation, the accused had never actually taken a life himself.

Of course, what Abraytha didn't add was that he was less concerned by the ethical implications of successfully killing the collector, than by the practical consequences that might result if the slaying was attempted, and failed. Should the Weathermen discover that their prisoner was no Shambler, they might come to question the origin of the signal they'd picked up — and however honourable they had appeared thus far, Abraytha trusted no Celestials to abide by their principles, when it came to the Tainted.

With the lethal avenue dismissed, they turned to other ideas. Just picking it up and throwing it overboard might not work, if it could fly through the Void under its own power — and more to the point, the risk was too great of it

convincing the would-be-throwers to reconsider, letting it loose on the deck of the ship. Xiantio's trance-like infatuation demonstrated the allure of the being all too well; she might have broken its spell twice, but even that feat relied upon the inevitable fact that she had fallen back under its spell at least once even after freeing herself of it.

One Dead Weatherman suggested that one man might climb out of the ship and break open the wall from the outside, releasing what was held inside into the intervoids with no transportation needed. This was rejected on the grounds that whoever did that may not survive the ordeal; though their name referred to the dead-reckoning techniques they practised, the Dead Weathermen were of course no strangers to self-sacrifice, but a lost captain was enough for one day.

Finally, one of the Weathermen — the female-presenting one who had initially introduced them to the ship — chirped up.

"What if we break apart the ship around the cell, and just let that bit float away?"

It was an absurd suggestion, but the problem was absurd, and try as they might, none could come up with a better plan — so the crew conceded.

* * *

Xiantio and Abraytha got to work at once, hacking away at the wooden structure of the ship with the hammers the Dead Weathermen had supplied them with. It felt somehow *wrong* on a deep and visceral level to Abraytha, to banish an entity as beautiful as this into the Nothingness Beyond. As his hammer hit the wood again and again, as the splinters rose up from the floor and danced across the room, landing sometimes near the cell and sometimes on the ship's side of the emerging crevice, the Unbound Scavenger felt the beck and call of the siren.

He stopped smashing the underdeck, and stared off into the Void. Distantly he was aware of someone calling his name, right next to him, but that didn't seem important at the moment. The only important thing was… himself.

Himself. Of course, *that* was why the Dead Weathermen had thought it had been a vampire; it was — it was *him*. What else could Xiantio have loved so quickly, so deeply? *Yes. That was it, must be it.* It was him in that cell, it had always been him, and he needed to *save himself* —

In perfect knowledge, in sudden, divine revelation, Abraytha stepped towards the cell, and a shadow — laden with fractals and mosaics — reached out towards him —

* * *

Xiantio hacked and hacked away at the wood, devoting all of themself to the destruction of her *faux* husband's security of life. So it wasn't until he had ceased all work and was staring mindlessly into the cell, that Xiantio noticed Abraytha had become bewitched by the horrible beauty.

They grabbed him by the arm and swung his face toward their own, hoping to regain favour. Abraytha's face cleared from a reverent smile to a curious frown — and then Xiantio saw in his eyes *aglow*.

* * *

Aware again of Xiantio, and disgusted that the inmate had taken away such an awareness from him, Abraytha took his hammer to the plank in front of him, smashing it and soothing his pain by imagining that it was the creature itself that he was hitting. *How dare he!*

This plank just so happened to be the final, foundational piece which kept the cell, and the section around it, fastened to the rest of the structure.

A Void Ship made of wood and iron was ridiculous. It creaked and whispered as it eased through the climes and zones between universes, seeming to breathe like a living thing. But now a low, groaning sound spread to every corner, from the Captain's quarters to the mess hall. Abraytha and Xiantio, hand in hand, stood before the cell, staring unphased at the creature which had so haunted them. They smiled, and squeezed each others' hands.

The floor beneath them shuddered, splintered —

— and gave way.

The Unbound Scavenger and the Cat-Eared Winterian, embracing each other, fell from the Dead Weathermen's ship, and with them fell the so-called vampire, the collector of skies, the false god and pretender to sublimity — now exploding into the rawest swirl of beauty and horror. The pair could not tell if this was death, or release, or some mixture of both; they looked away as the shimmering display shrank into the distance, fearful of being drawn, at the last, into its fearful attraction.

Within just a few seconds, it was gone, and so were the Dead Weathermen. Their trajectories in the unending Void had diverged. They'd lost ship. *They'd lost the ship* —

Around them was inky blackness, inkier than any either of them had witnessed before; this wasn't the Hollow as they knew it, in its myriad of hues, but the Void, the *true* Void, in the starkest and darkest of its layers. They were alone in the centre of the infinite nothingness of which all nothings were but pallid reflections; they had been swallowed into the stomach of the mindless hunger which had frothed and gnawed at the town. No up, no down, no east, no west. No Summer or Winter. *Completely alone*.

Just as they understood the full despair of their situation — just as their dread threatened to boil over into panic — a burst of colours filled their sight, and they felt themselves falling in directions they could not have named for all the treasures in all the worlds.

And then the darkness returned, but changed; a void, yes, but a homelier sort of void, a *lesser* kind. It had that familiar feeling of intra-cosmic vacuum, bustling with quanta, minute physical entities being created and annihilated every picosecond through uncertainty; not *quite* nothing, and that made all the difference.

Not that this more mundane sort of void wasn't hazardous to most humanoids' health, all told. It occurred to Abraytha that he wasn't sure why he and Xiantio, still

holding tight to one another, were able to breathe; after a moment's thought, both decided to simply be grateful that they *could*.

And there was more to be grateful for, yet. They didn't know what universe they were in, but they were together. As long as they had each other, Xiantio and Abraytha knew they could find their way back. More than that — they knew they would always be home, no matter the path ahead.

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TO BE CONTINUED
IN
"ARCHITECTS OF A FAILED WORLD"